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Connect First

By: James T. Berry, Ph.D..

How do you approach your spouse when you first see them after a day away from one another? Do you seek out your spouse greeting him or her with enthusiasm? Or are you one who “does your own thing” and your spouse discovers you at home? In my experience personally and as a therapist who has seen hundreds of troubled marriages, my advice to you is to connect first. Connecting first means purposefully finding your spouse when you first arrive home rather than reading the mail, playing with children, getting on the computer, watching TV, or taking a rest. Find your spouse, greet with affection, ask him or her about their day, and be interested. You can rest, play, watch, and read later.

Though not all your marriage issues will be resolved, greetings and partings are some of the most frequent and important interactions you will have with your spouse. Most couples do greetings and partings well naturally early in their marriage. After several years though, we sometimes assume that our spouses no longer need special attention. Not true! We all need special attention especially after being married a while. Ever hear of the seven year itch? It itches much more if we are not getting attention, respect, and affection from our spouse.

If greetings and partings are done well, your relationship will continue to have frequent and meaningful boosts of energy and connection. Experienced happily married persons know that taking care of the relationship first leads to freedom and positive feelings. This means freedom to play golf, visit with your friends, spend time on projects, etc. On the other hand, if your spouse feels starved for attention and connection, then you are likely to feel pressure, resentment, and a desire to avoid. You will feel like your spouse is never satisfied. You’ll have a harder time enjoying that sports event or time off because you’ll feel like your spouse resents your time away.

A vicious cycle results from negative interactions of this kind. Your own avoidance or neglect of your spouse leads to him or her feeling hurt. Usually spouses either react with anger or distance. If your spouse spews sarcasm or insults, you’ll be offended and more likely to distance yourself. If your spouse withdraws, you’ll probably interpret it as your spouse not really caring or wanting you. Either way, you will probably withdraw or hit back with anger leading to a dangerous spiraling vicious cycle.

It does not take long for vicious cycles to do major damage to a relationship. Alternatively, the idea of connecting first sets up what might be called a “eucious” cycle. A “eucious” cycle is one where one good experience leads to another creating an environment of alternating constructive interactions. By greeting your spouse positively with warmth, eye contact, and physical affection, you are sending the powerful message, “I am glad to be with you and desire you.” When you leave for the day, make sure you connect by finding your spouse, informing him or her of your plans, and give affectionate words and touch. The message is “I respect you. I am connected to you. I care for you.”

There are many other important keys to relational success, such as, communicating vulnerably, clarifying expectations, dealing with boundaries with friends and in-laws, parenting issues, money issues, one’s own family of origin issues, etc. Be on the lookout for more articles in the future on these

topics. For now, though, start connecting purposefully during your greetings and partings. Connecting first is not that hard. You might be surprised by how such simple interactions can change your relationship.

For more information on marriage issues, check out our website at ebenezercounseling.com.

About the Author

Dale Berry is a Licensed Psychologist and is the clinical director of Ebenezer Counseling Services. Dr. Berry started his practice in 1996, and in 1998, the practice developed into a group named Ebenezer Counseling Services and has grown into a multi-service practice with the goal of serving the greater Knoxville community.